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Poetry Quebec: Where are you originally from?

Brian Campbell: I like to tell my adult ESL students -- mostly immigrants -- that I too am an immigrant, from an exotic place called Ontario. That I had to show my passport, change my money at the border, even learn a new language. No, seriously, I came here from my native Toronto in the early '90s at the biblical age of thirty-three. And I did have to suffer a kind of death -- not a crucifixion, but a kind of death -- in order to live the happy kind of life I have now.

PQ: Why did you come to Quebec?

BC: I could go on and on. To find inspiration. To test a relationship that I did not find entirely inspiring. (The relationship failed the test, mainly because I wanted it to.) Because I was excited by French culture, fashion and architecture. By the seeming superabundance of stunning, stylish, vivacious women. Because I was sick of my native city, which seemed -- and is -- very much a wasteland. Because I was dried up creatively, and tired of conversations with fellow poets who would always wind up complaining about that corporate, commercial, soulless, pulseless T.O. Because going to Montreal seemed like going to another country -- it is the most European metropolis in North America -- without severing my connection to friends and family just down the highway from here. Because it was affordable to live here, and work part-time to support my writing and music, which I have done since, something that would be pretty well impossible where I came from. Because it was convenient to take a teacher's degree here. At that point in my life, becoming an expatriate -- in a place like Madrid, Tokyo or Buenos Aires -- seemed the only other option available.

PQ: When did you encounter your first Quebec poem?

BC: My reflexive answer is the song "Suzanne" by Leonard Cohen. That was in grade 7. Teaching songs as poetry or "poetry put to music" was new then, in the early '70s, and this song was relatively new. I appreciate the enlightened English teacher -- an elderly British man -- who played it on the little record player in front of the classroom. The poem -- or song -- is very Montreal, isn't it? When I first went to the Vieux Port, there she was -- Our Lady of the Harbour. It's a very bohemian, romantic piece, and may have planted the seeds for my attraction to this city.

PQ: When and how did you first become interested in poetry?

BC: When I wrote my first poem, at the age of sixteen. Oddly enough, this too was in a classroom. A substitute English teacher had us do a poem based on the famous William Carlos Williams poem about eating the plums in the refrigerator. The product of that exercise I still consider worthwhile; it later got published in a university magazine.

But the North York Suburb I grew up in was not a very auspicious place to cultivate an interest in poetry or become a poet. Hardly anyone there even read a book! I didn't find a proper sense of community or environment until I went to University of Toronto. There I did an undergraduate degree in English -- mostly poetry courses -- and fell under the sway of T.S. Eliot, Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and others. Then I started to build a body of my own work, and consider poetry a primary interest.

PQ: What is your working definition of a poem?

BC: A poem is an instance of concentrated, rhythmic language that strikes us with a revelation of what it is to be alive.

PQ: Is this something you came to as a result of having written a particular sort of poem or body of poems, or did you first begin writing poetry with this in mind?

BC: I actually came up with this while preparing to teach a class through the Quebec Writers' Federation "Writers-in-Cegeps" program. I asked myself questions that I eventually would pose to the students: What is poetry to you? What ideas come to mind when you hear the word poetry? (The students said things like "poetry rhymes" or "poetry is beautiful language" -- both true, as far as they go.) I compiled a number of "definitions" that became a hand-out entitled, tellingly, "Poetry -- some definitions of the indefinable." These included Marianne Moore's "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" and Emily Dickinson's famous remark that "If I read a book and... feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." Then I thought hard and came up with my own functional definition that reflects, to some degree, the priorities of my own practice: distillation and musicality of language, the unusual rather than clichéd.

Of course, I wouldn't allow myself to be hobbled by that or any other encapsulation. Poetry and prose exist on a continuum; at times in a given piece they work well together. I also think of what Margaret Atwood once said: "Poetry isn't written from the idea down. It's written from the phrase, line and stanza up, which is different from what your teacher taught you to do in school."

PQ: Do you have a writing ritual?

BC: I'm a rather impulsive writer who goes through cycles of productivity and non-productivity. But I do have an ideal ritual: to get up in the morning, have the day relatively free before me, brew a good coffee and sit down and create. I try to arrange my

circumstances to allow that ritual to happen. When I manage to actually do it, that's when I'm usually at my happiest.

PQ: What is your approach to writing of poems?

BC: In my twenties and thirties I was very inspiration driven, which meant, of course, that as I became more self-critical, my production became very sporadic, and eventually -- shortly after I arrived here -- shut down altogether. This, of course, was very distressing. Eventually, I discovered a song-writing voice; I wrote about sixty songs over a space of ten years -- even went so far as recording an album -- before going back to poetry. Right now I find that I can open up my laptop and let the words come, and I can often shape them into something that surprises me, something quite good. Some poems are riffs on language; others are spurred by reading or experience, and a few have been driven by a need to deal with a certain theme.

PQ: Earlier you said that one of the reasons you left Toronto was because you were dried up creatively, and now you say the same thing happened once you arrived in Montreal. How do you explain that? What do you think brought out the song-writing voice in you?

BC: You make me think of Cavafy's famous poem, "The City." But things weren't quite as bad as that. Although I enjoyed and was intrigued by Montreal, it took some time to get an authentic feel for it. I felt I had to learn the French language, to integrate with the social realities here, so that my expression vis-à-vis this place would be natural, or at least, second nature.

At the risk of sounding trite, Montreal is a romantic place: the life of couples is more primary here than in the city where I'm originally from. Song writing came out of solitude and longing -- nearly all the songs are love songs or songs of loneliness, although there are also some social justice and humorous pieces. It also came out a level of mastery of the guitar that I reached here, and some happy discoveries -- mainly, coalescences between certain chord progressions and the lyrics they evoked -- that first took place in a certain walk-up apartment on rue Brébeuf in the Plateau.

PQ: Do you think that being part of the English-speaking minority in Quebec influences your writing?

BC: Quebec is a province of minorities, and the most beleaguered minority is the so-called majority, les francophones. Being surrounded by French, and speaking it every day -- I lived on the Plateau for eight years before moving to the more multicultural Mile End -- means I've absorbed French vocabulary and expressions, and these can inform and influence the words I choose in English. I have a number of poems that bring French

phrases and sensibilities into English; these include my prose poems, which follow, after all, what was originally a French form.

PQ: Do you think that writing in English in Quebec is a political act?

BC: This strikes me as a tiresome question; it seems to hark back to the early years of language legislation, or at least when Lucien Bouchard was in power. Generally speaking, I support that legislation, despite some of its absurd implications -- sign measuring and the like. (Recently, under the current Marois government, old hackles have been raised by the Office Québécois de la langue française ordering an Italian restaurateur to replace Italian words, including *pasta*, in his menus with their French equivalents -- but it is notable that this and a few other similar excesses led to the resignation of the head of that agency.) Bill 14, an expansion of language legislation under consideration by the minority PQ government as I write, has led to ominous headlines in the English press. But, in its rough-and-all-too-unready-way, the Charter of the French Language has worked in terms of preserving this French corner in an otherwise English-dominated North America.

Of course, I chose to come here after the Charter was in place and its effects were already apparent. There was no question to me about learning the language of the majority, and I'm sure I would do the same if I moved to any other place. A language is a richness, a blessing, an alternative way of seeing things. The only reason I write in English is that it is language I dream in, that I've mastered.

PQ: Why do you write?

BC: Primarily, for the joy of it -- there is almost no greater pleasure than the rush of creating a good poem. All the aesthetic decisions involved in drafting and honing can be a great pleasure as well. I love the music of language, and poetry, it seems, is what I'm best at. I also write because through this form of expression, I learn even for myself what I am thinking and feeling. My best work comes as a surprise: if it fails to surprise me, I'd say that's a strong indication that it fails as poetry.

PQ: Does your day job impact on your writing?

BC: Actually, for the most part my day job is an evening job. Teaching English as an Additional Language is in some ways a stimulus; relating to it through my students makes me relate to it again as new, in all its eccentricities. It's also a very social job, a nice break from the solitude of writing. Insofar as I have to be on call for supply work during the day, and open to other things like translation contracts to supplement that income, my routine can be turned upside down, and it can be hard to get back into a creative rhythm.

PQ: How many drafts do you usually go through before you are satisfied with a poem?

BC: I now write and revise with my laptop, so what constitutes a draft has changed somewhat from way back when, in the typewriter era. I'm quite confident now of my cuttings, pastings, and deletions, but when I start to feel unsure the changes I'm making are improvements, I copy and paste the whole poem within the same file and continue shaping the pasted version. After I've reached a point where the poem feels done, I print out all drafts, and then delete all but the most recent draft. I keep all the hard copies of my so-called drafts. Rarely, but it has happened, that I've gone back to a draft and found it better than a revised version. Most of the time, I go through about six or seven "cut and paste" drafts, although the majority of changes that have taken place in these early drafts have disappeared into the ether. Then on the printouts I make handwritten changes, fine tunings, which lead to new printouts. There could be as many as twenty of these -- or as few as one or two.

PQ: Do you have a favourite time and place to write?

BC: Right now, most of my creative writing I do in the morning, right after I've woken up with a cup of coffee. This, at the kitchen table, a pleasant, sunlit place with lots of plants and art on the walls. I also like to write in cafés. Blogging, revising, and other writing-related work I'm likely do at any time, anywhere, but often late at night or in the wee hours of the morning -- in my home office.

PQ: Do you write with the intention of "growing a manuscript" or do you work on individual poems that are later collected into a book?

BC: Mostly I have done the latter. With *Passenger Flight*, after writing about twenty prose poems, I got the idea of writing a book of them, and then deliberately wrote in that form until I had enough to put together a book. This was a new experience for me; it may never be repeated.

PQ: What makes a "prose poem" -- an oxymoron if there ever was one -- a poem?

BC: Fellow Montreal poet Maxianne Berger wrote a nice comment on *Passenger Flight* that unfortunately didn't make it to the back of my book, but is on Signature's website: "Brian Campbell uses every device available within the poet's armamentarium -- except the line break. This allows Campbell's somewhat eccentric persona to speak with manic breathlessness as his 'one open eye' explores the 'flexuous' possibilities of the imagination. The mind fills a void. It does fill. Have faith."

I love that word, armamentarium. Makes me think at once, for some reason, of both armadillos and of medieval coats of armour. As well as of course the abstract but

etymologically more closely related word, armaments. Her comment says a lot about that hybrid form, the prose poem. Yes, in a number of the prose poems, we have rhymes, rhythms, alliterations, repetitions -- the very stock and stuff of poetry. And yet to the extent that prose poems are not constrained by line or stanza break, they can seem wild, slap-dash -- “manic” and “breathless” as she says -- or fall into realms of anecdote, joke, absurdity. At other times they can express a loose, jazzy but very pure music. Prose poems can remind us that so-called free verse is really not so free.

PQ: What is the toughest part of writing for you?

BC: Making the switch after the long, intensive period of editing -- putting together a book manuscript, say -- back to raw creativity. Someone said -- I don't know who -- that you write loose but edit tight. Writing and editing are definitely very different activities that seem to draw on different regions of the brain. After obsessively scrutinizing every word before it goes to print, it's hard to put those reflexes aside in order to enter into the unmediated, to generate something new. Sometimes, it requires a long fallow period.

PQ: What is your idea of a muse?

BC: She's a nearly impossible combination: caring, daring, and beautiful. She's young, wise as the ages, loves the poet's poetry, inspires it constantly, and is never ever banal. She makes love with total abandon, then disappears into mists so that in anguished longing the poet composes the most magnificent love poems ever written, just to bring her back. And yet she is always there, somehow, supporting the poet's serene creation. In other words, she probably doesn't exist. Yeats had Maude Gonne; she came pretty close: was daring, beautiful, but almost utterly uncaring (it's hard to get even that basic combination right.) My own partner -- we'll soon be married -- is the closest approximation of a muse I've found in the so-called real world. Yes, I could say she is my muse.

PQ: Is travel important to your writing?

BC: Funny I should come to this question now: I'm doing this part of the interview in the same Quebec City bed and breakfast where I wrote “Casements,” a prose poem in *Passenger Flight*. The night view out the window here -- a spectacular view of the sparkling lights of the city -- is much the same one that inspired that poem (actually, I'm in the room next door). I can see into other apartments across the narrow street here just outside the walls of the old city. It put me in mind of Baudelaire's “Les fenêtres” (“Windows”) from *Paris Spleen* -- I had brought Louise Varese's translation along for the ride, and bought the original French version at a bookstore around the corner and read it that afternoon. So I wrote a palimpsest of that poem.

The title poem of my first collection, *Guatemala and Other Poems*, I wrote a few years after a six-month trip to Mexico and Guatemala, where I learned Spanish, among other things. In *Passenger Flight*, travel, in all its glitziness and romantic expectation, is a major theme -- as the title would suggest. In my forthcoming collection, I have a section called "Getaways"-- poems inspired by hotels, cottages, resort towns here in Quebec. At times I still feel like a cultural tourist in this province I moved to more than twenty years ago. Yet for all that, I am not a frequent traveler. My own passport hasn't been renewed in years. But in as much as I engage in that most basic level of writing -- writing spurred by immediate surroundings -- travel can refresh and trigger creation.

PQ: Do you have a favourite Quebec poet?

BC: I don't have a favourite anything. I have a soft spot for Saint-Denys Garneau, the first Québécois poet I read in the original: poems like "Cage d'oiseau," "Accompaniment" and, of course, his journals are very immediate and touching. I've read some very impressive poems by Yves Préfontaine: "Peuple inhabité" is a kind of masterpiece. I very much enjoy Hélène Dorion and Louise Desjardins; indeed, I recently translated a lengthy poem by the latter of those two. In English, the first poets that spring to mind are Leonard Cohen and Irving Layton, two seminal influences I scarcely ever read now. Layton I hardly think of as a Quebec poet, although of course he was; a number of his strongest poems were written in, and about, Toronto, where he lived for many years; others in Greece and Italy. I think of him more as a Jewish-Canadian poet. Of course, I can't acclaim his whole oeuvre, but even his crap has a winning liveliness. Others in my "Quebec pantheon" include A.M. Klein, Artie Gold, Robyn Sarah, and Carmine Starnino.

PQ: Do you think there is an audience, outside of friends or other poets, for poetry?

BC: Actually, "audience" -- with its roots in the auditory and relation to words like "audition" and "auditorium" -- connotes a throng of listeners, so it strikes me as a more suitable term for performance art, i.e. spoken word. The word has a very contemporary, crowd-pleasing feel; although I love doing poetry readings, I see who attends the typical reading -- mostly other people who write or try to write poetry, family, friends -- so that inclines me to answer no to your question.

"Readership" is probably the more appropriate word for poetry, at least for the kind I write. If "audience" is taken to include readership, then the answer becomes obvious. In the long term, yes... and only for a tiny minority of poets and poems. Those who get anthologized, get on academic curricula and the like. Those who become part of the cultural heritage. If me and mine be among them, only time will tell. If time -- or rather humanity -- continues. Even that is very much in doubt.